

'Arts for All!' *Can I Dance Too?*

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Abstract

"I always wanted to dance...but Mom said we were too poor! Dad only wanted me to dance for him...I was too fat...I was stupid...too clumsy...so I sat in a corner."

It is time we start exploring how the field of creative arts can be utilised to serve everyone regardless of age, race, gender, ability or needs. The field of creative arts has great potential for going beyond its normal, conventional and traditional purpose of entertainment. A creative mind combined with a creative body enables one to be self-expressive and self-defined. A child, regardless of needs or abilities, is full of curiosity and imagination and is uninhibited in movement expressions, which creates an excellent foundation for providing creative movement experiences, drama and role-playing that will assist children of all ages to further:

1. Develop their socio-emotional domain;
2. Enhance cognitive understanding; and
3. Stimulate creativity, thus becoming unique individuals.

This project explores alternative ways of utilising the arts to help 'traumatised' children discover the 'self', 'step out and be seen', 'speak up and be heard', and 'feel and be felt'.

Keywords: *arts for all, self, step out, speak up*

Definition

'Arts for all' refers to utilising arts holistically to serve everyone regardless of age, race, gender, ability or needs. 'Self' can be understood as recognising the person as a whole, with consciousness, awareness, assertiveness, strengths, weaknesses, abilities, disabilities and expressions. 'Step out' means to come out, to show oneself to the outside world and to experience what the outside world has in store for the individual. 'Speak up' means to be able to express a thought, opinion, comment or just about anything in a way that is most comfortable to the person, either through a conventional manner or through an alternative medium or mode of expression. The word 'traumatised' can be looked at from pathological and psychiatric aspects. Pathol refers to a body wound or sudden shock produced by physical injury such as violence or accident. From a psychiatric viewpoint, it is an experience that produces psychological injury or pain. A person experiencing this condition physically or psychologically is considered a traumatised person.

Introduction

The purpose of this research project is to study and explore how the fields of dance, drama, creative movements and storytelling can be utilised more than just for its traditional and conventional purpose of entertainment. This research-based workshop aims to further utilise the field of creative arts through various activities and exercises in order to empower children by enhancing their cognitive level, stimulating creative thinking, improving socio-emotional

development and developing self-determination, self-confidence, integration and inclusion among children with low self-esteem or learning disabilities (slow learners). The researcher also aims to investigate whether the field of creative arts serves as therapeutic, improving a disturbed child's physical, emotional and mental faculties and promoting a sense of well-being.

Creative Movements, Dance, Storytelling, Drama...to...Express...

Basic question:

"Why utilise creative movements, dance, drama and storytelling?"

Creative movement is the basis for exploring our bodies and their capacities in preparation for sports, leisure activities and healthy living (Lloyd 1998: 1). Just as we want creative minds in our children or the younger generation, we also want them to be equipped with creative bodies. A creative mind combined with a creative body enable one to be self-expressive and self-defined. Creative movement as a form of empowerment enables dancers or children with special needs to rehabilitate their motor and psychological response or to engage in physical activities beyond the range of a normal person.

Creative movement involves a process of the individual or the group selecting movements, sequencing these movements, expressing their feelings according to the situation or theme and performing for themselves or others. Dunkin (1988) states that creative movement is not a composed series of steps or dance imposed by the teacher but rather patterns of movement created by the child with the guidance of the teacher or facilitator. As such, children with special needs or learning disabilities can benefit from a creative movement workshop because movement combined with rhythm and expressions has remarkable powers of emotional and spiritual renewal as well as aesthetic fulfilment.

Dance is undoubtedly one of the best tools to analyse one's freedom, because dance itself is known to be liberating or to have liberating effects. People dance for joy, to entertain and to be entertained. People also dance to communicate their deepest feelings (Joyce 1994: 1). Dance and drama have opened up the field of arts for its patrons to indulge in creativity and diversity. Drama and storytelling, on the other hand, provide opportunities to become someone or anything else through mimesis, imagination and role playing. In short, creative movements, dance, drama and storytelling empower children by:

1. Enhancing their cognitive level;
2. Stimulating creative thinking;
3. Improving socio-emotional development; and
4. Developing self-determination and self-confidence.

Educators throughout the world have used creative movements, dance and storytelling to enhance the creativity of young children, children with special needs and children with learning disabilities. It is no different in Malaysia, where various types of movements combining the imitation of nature, role-play, dance, music and stories are used for the social, emotional, mental and physical development of children. Creative movement is a unique form of self-expression in which each participant uses rhythmic movements to express his or her thoughts, ideas and feelings. The goal is to communicate through movement.

Creativity is an important concept to consider in educating children of any age group or capability. According to Humphrey (1987), the word 'creative' is derived from the Latin word *creatus*, which means 'produced through imaginative skill'. Humphrey further advocated that a child should be given the freedom to be fully involved in self-expressive activities, as a child is full of curiosity and imagination and is uninhibited in movement expressions. Lloyd (1998) stressed that these characteristics serve as an excellent foundation for providing

creative movements through dance and drama experiences that will assist children of all ages to develop creatively. Thus, this project utilises the potentials of creative movements, dance and drama as tools to improve children's creativity, especially children with special needs of all ages. For children with special needs, creative movement, dance and drama especially have the potential to further develop their cognitive understanding, improve their gross motor functions and help them become unique individuals.

Past and Current Research

The last decade saw a growing awareness of the utility of creative movements through music as a treatment for a wide range of children with autism. Research using creative movements as therapeutic aids for children with cerebral palsy is being studied by a team of researchers from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and the BOLD Center Penang, respectively. The team from USM consists of academics from the Drama and Theatre Department and The Neurosciences Medical Department (Kubang Kerian); this team is conducting on-going research on Gamelan Music and Creative Movements as therapy and pain management for children with cerebral palsy. The BOLD Center, together with the Penang Educational Consultative Council, and Penang State Government, carried out a creative Arts Project called 'Dream a Dream.' This project utilises creative movements as therapeutic and as a way to find common ground and understanding between children with different needs and from different social and family background. It must be mentioned that these research projects are non-invasive.

My Research Project

This research was performed at a shelter home for traumatised children. The shelter houses about 20 children ranging in age from 5–17 years old. Children from all races and

religious and ethnic backgrounds are admitted to the shelter. The present research is aimed at evaluating the utility of creative movements, drama, dance and storytelling as a way to empower traumatised children with special needs or learning difficulties and simultaneously to enhance their cognitive level, to help them speak up and to further develop confident and unique individuals through creativity and self-expression.

Participants

Eighteen children from Shan Children's Home participated in these research-based workshops. The children ranged in age from 5–17 years old. Of these 18 children, 12 were girls and 6 were boys. These children come from broken homes, neglected, poor and unhealthy living conditions, mentally and emotionally unhealthy parents, or physically, mentally, emotionally or sexually abusive environments; thus, they can be diagnosed as traumatised and victimised children. These children have been deprived of even basic needs by their parents and often have been blamed for their parents' ill fortunes. Unsurprisingly, these children also tend to blame themselves for bad things that happen to them, their families, friends and surroundings. Some of these children have been deprived of their dignity by being called derogatory names by their parents such as 'stupid', 'fat', 'ugly', 'useless' or 'worthless'. A few of them have also been sexually abused by their biological or step fathers, uncles, grandfathers or neighbours.

Methodology

The research was performed in a series of workshops that lasted for about six months from May until October 2010. The researcher initially planned to hold workshops three times a week, but this was reduced to twice a week due to time constraints on the shelter's part. Each session lasted two hours; thus, the researcher met with the children for four hours per week.

During this period, various exercises were introduced to the children. The general objectives of these exercises were to expose the children to:

1. Listening to instructions;
2. Being expressive;
3. Being responsive;
4. Encountering fear;
5. Tackling shyness and disappointments;
6. Facing challenges or obstacles;
7. Being less abusive themselves; and
8. Pouring out, during talking sessions, what was in their hearts and minds.

Some of these sessions were successful, and some were not so successful. In the beginning, some children were not as ready to open up as others. As the researcher frequented the home, spent more time with the children and listened empathetically, she earned their trust and gradually they opened up. These exercises were repeated but with different approaches. Improvisations are important when conducting such exercises. At times, the researcher had to make quick adjustments and fast decisions when executing the exercises. Children were kept busy in order not to be swayed or distracted from the exercises and to avoid a loss of interest or a cold and non-responsive shift in demeanour. After each session, the researcher would conclude by allowing each child to express how she felt that day, what the session meant to her, and how the session helped or further disturbed her. The researcher used this information to evaluate information regarding each child's progress and to strategise work for the following sessions.

Some exercises were meant to be agonising in order to help the child express what had been previously suppressed. Subsequent sessions became easier for both the researcher and

the child once this articulation is made, and her development is further facilitated. The final session ends with a hug from the researcher to all the children and hugs to and from each other. This final session, including the hugs, is important to ensure security, gain trust and instil a sense of care, love and togetherness.

Activities and Objectives Achieved

1. Listening to instructions—children are able to comprehend, follow and react positively.
2. Feeling and moving to the music or sound—children are able to respond accordingly initially and then react to music in their own ways, such as developing into something else (e.g., from a bird flying to a tree moving violently).
3. Acting or playing a role—children are able to impersonate or imagine, acting the role (e.g., giving them a chance to become someone else, often a role-model, or just the freedom to become someone empowering).
4. Responding and reacting to stories—children are able to comprehend, imagine, feel, react and give build-up to the story.
5. Arousing emotions—children are able to encounter fear, control anger, tackle disappointments, establish a sense of security, and laugh and be happy.
6. Expressive in their own unique ways—children understand that imitating others is fine but that uniqueness is appropriate to express, and, therefore, individuality stands out. Even in groups, the 'self' can be identified while maintaining the togetherness, harmony and unity of a group.

7. Creative—children are able to choreograph dance movements, direct a play and create a list of props, stage arrangement, script or narration.
8. Reduced fear, anger, stress, shyness—children express the ability to feel and move as the body, mind and soul desire.

Scope of Activities

The children in the shelter were introduced to various activities in order to promote cognitive enhancement, improve socio-emotional development, stimulate creativity and develop self-determination, which helps lead them towards self-empowerment. Exercises such as introducing oneself departed from the typical introduction of 'my name is KLIOPPO' and became modes of creativity in which each child performed a simple act along with his or her name and the group imitated each act after the child performed it. This exercise was found to help break the ice, as every child came up with their own unique ways of self-introduction.

Physical exercises such as running, jumping, walking in different styles, screaming, rolling on the floor, clapping hands and changing the group's geometrical shapes always helped to set the momentum. The children or participants were always kept in a circle in order to ensure inclusion, eye-contact and a sense of belonging. Imitating a person, an animal, an object or a machine also was helpful in role-playing. These exercises help the child to escape the self and become someone or something else, such as an empowering figure or object.

Role-playing exercises such as playing the sculptor and his creation, magician and his craft, painter and his work or designer and his designs were useful in enhancing and stimulating creativity. Working in pairs, threes and foursomes promoted group understanding and

cooperativeness. Utilising stories, news or characters from newspapers was helpful for storytelling sessions.

Listening to music or sounds can help a disturbed child be aroused of her emotions, thus encountering them and feeling empowered. Music, dance and painting also help children feel free to express themselves as if there is no right or wrong, which helps them find their inner self that has been lost or silenced due to aggression or similar traumatic conditions. Through repetitions of these various exercises, the children who were once shy and afraid became less shy and were able to speak up, give suggestions and ideas and interact.

Limitations

Some activities or exercises could not be fully explored, as some children were too young (five years old), had not been to school or were severely traumatised. It takes time to work with these children. They need one-to-one attention and more time, which the researcher was unable to provide. Alternatively, the researcher would work with these children while the others were placed in groups of their own. Some children were too young to follow instructions and heavily depended on the instructor to guide them specifically through the activities.

Language also seemed to be a problem, as some children were not conversant in English or Bahasa Malaysia and only spoke and understood their mother tongue. The instructor spoke Tamil to some of them and utilised translation from Malay or English to Hokkien. Space was another problem in the sense that the living area of the shelter was too small for many activities. Often, the children were cramped, or each group was forced to do the exercise on different days. Sometimes the children would be divided into groups and given specific

locations to carry out their activities, such as the living room, kitchen or porch; this division and space allocation consumed time. However, the researcher remains grateful to the shelter for allowing the workshop to take place in its vicinity.

Success of These Sessions

The success of these sessions was measured through the ability of each child to:

1. Speak up;
2. Express;
3. Move as creatively as the body and mind desires;
4. Lead and be allowed to be led;
5. Follow instructions;
6. Be able to work independently and in groups;
7. Be able to detach from problems;
8. Be able to suggest ideas and give solutions;
9. Be able to control anger;
10. Be less abusive; and
11. Control stress.

Success of this research was also measured by looking at the ability of the children to produce two performances consisting of dances that they choreographed utilising movements they learned in the workshop sessions. They also directed a play ('Snow White') with some feedback and help from the researcher and with some alterations to the original story line. The performances were held on 30th October 2010 (Shan Children's Home – Deepavali Fund Raising) and 31st December 2010 (Fund raising and Christmas).

Suggestions

The home has requested that similar workshops continue in the near future, as the children demonstrated improvement in behaviour patterns, anger management, stress management, interaction, leadership skills and creativity. These improvements have affected them positively, especially in the realm of self-confidence, and have enhanced their cognitive level and learning capabilities to a limited extent. It is believed that continued effort might help in enhancing positive results to their self-empowerment and learning abilities. The researcher plans to investigate further the utility of creative arts as a key instrument for community engagement and empowerment.

Conclusion

Research on the utility of creative movements, dance, drama and storytelling as either a form of therapy or empowerment for children with special needs and learning disabilities in Malaysia is an area that needs serious attention. Published articles on the utility of creative movements, dance, drama and storytelling for children with special needs are scarce in Malaysia, with the exception of some articles written by the infamous American-based play and drama therapist Sue Jennings. Most of the workshops held in Malaysia usually end with the organisers reviewing the success or failure of the process through a performance that is documented via video recording.

Research such as this project and other, similar research conducted on children with special needs provide evidence that creative movements, dance, drama and storytelling do offer children alternative means of viewing themselves as truly unique individuals. Change can be

effected by helping children understand that there are no ready-made answers on how to feel, see, think or move their bodies through space. Creative movement exercises require children to sense, observe, feel, act and react, invent, respond and be spontaneous; children with multiple handicapped conditions have been deprived or neglected of these types of exercises in Malaysia. There is a definite need to write on the process, methodology, approaches, outcomes, suggestions, recommendations and feedback from participants, such as their emotions, interest, discomfort and ways to improve future, similar research.

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